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ABSTRACT

Within the community college setting, counselors in counseling centers have historically provided academic advising, career guidance, and personal counseling. Today, however, the profile of the typical community college student is very different from that of the student of 40 years ago, when counseling centers originated. Today's community college students are often older, part-time commuter students who work and may have familial obligations. Given this change in demographics, there is an increasing concern that the established theories and practices used in counseling are problematic, since they are based on the experiences of traditional college students. Older students have greater responsibility, and women historically have been marginalized in the academy. Minority and immigrant students have needs that often differ from the traditional student as well. Researchers suggest additional studies of nontraditional learners, using the results to provide training and workshops for faculty, staff, and students. Do (1996) urges community colleges to recruit bilingual and bicultural counselors. Helfgot (1995) argues that investment in technology will improve the accessibility and quality of counseling. This digest notes that educators must also deal with these issues in the light of limited resource availability. (Contains 14 references.) (NB)

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Counseling Non-Traditional Students at the Community College

By Edward Francis Ryan

Within the community college setting, counseling centers were developed to help students "find and effectively use the information, skills, insight, and understanding they need in order to be successful, first and primarily in the college and secondarily, later in life" (Helfgot, 1995 p. 49). While there has been some variation in the types of services available, counselors have historically provided academic advising, career guidance, and personal counseling (Coll, 1993; Helfgot, 1995). Today the profile of the typical community college student is quite different than when counseling centers originated some forty years ago, but the services offered look basically the same (Cohen and Brawer, 1996). The change in student demographics has caused many to question whether the counseling models developed in the 1960s still meet the needs of today's students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998; Pineda and Bowes, 1995).

This digest addresses this issue, first exploring how the shifting demographics of community colleges affect the counseling function and then offering suggestions that counselors and researchers can employ to ensure that the services provided address the needs of today's students.

A Changing Demographic

Since the early 1970s, the student demographics at community colleges have shifted significantly. As Pineda and Bowes (1995) note, "older, part time students; full time workers; evening students; commuter students; and women represent a significant population in today's community colleges" (p.151). In 1970 for example, women constituted 40% of students attending community college, whereas they comprised 59% in 1999 (NCES, 2003). Additionally, the enrollment status of students has changed as part-time students now account for 61% of all those enrolled (NCES, 2003). Community colleges are becoming more ethnically diverse. Minority students constituted 19% of those who attended two-year institutions in 1971, and now account for 33% of the population (NCES, 2003). Finally, the community college has seen a rise in the number of students who are older (Coley, 2000), first generation (Phillippe and Valliga, 2000), immigrants (Brilliant, 2000; Do, 1996) and single parents (Phillippe and Valliga, 2000).

Challenges Non-Traditional Students Face

Given the change in demographics, there is an increasing concern that the established theories and practices used in counseling are problematic since they are based on the experiences of traditional college students (Aragon, 2000; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998). Recognizing this possibility, researchers are now exploring the unique challenges non-traditional students face. For example, scholars have noted that older students tend to have significant family responsibilities, work commitments, and off campus obligations that can impede their academic progress (Durodoye et al, 2000). Additionally, many researchers are examining the manner in which adults learn. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) argue that adult students encounter a number of biological, psychological, and sociological changes as they grow older, all of which can affect learning. Accordingly, the authors make the argument that those working with adult learners need to be sensitive to their life experiences.

Researchers have also explored the role of gender in learning. Concerned that women have been historically marginalized with the academy, Hayes (2000) examined how the educational environment, and, in particular, faculty interactions, institutional culture, and the curriculum can affect the manner in which women learn. She notes that the use of certain textbooks and teaching styles reinforce gender stereotypes and ultimately affect the success of female students.

Other studies have examined how cultural values can impede the success of non-traditional students (Brilliant, 2000; Do, 1996). In a study of first generation and immigrant students, Do (1996) notes that those who are not from the mainstream culture may face difficulty adjusting to a new environment. Specifically, Do argues that students educated in some Asian and Latin American countries learn in a system that values intuitive and experiential processes whereas the United States focuses on the development of analytical and linear modes of thought. Consequently, these immigrant students "encounter difficulties when confronted with schoolwork that is geared for abilities with which they have the least experience and proficiency" (p.12). If counselors are unaware of these differences in learning style, they may misinterpret poor performance as a lack of ability when it is instead an issue of adjustment to new modes of learning.

Addressing the Counseling Needs of Non-Traditional Students

While the aforementioned examples in no way provide a complete overview of the challenges non-traditional students face, they illustrate the disconnect that can occur

between community college students and their counselors. Hoping to raise awareness, higher education scholars have argued that community colleges should employ a number of strategies to better understand and work with non-traditional students. For example, Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) argue that the higher education community should conduct research on the development processes of non-traditional students. Concerned that we know far too little about the intellectual and social development of non-traditional students, these authors suggest a national profile of community college students be developed which can then be used to help form new models of counseling.

Other scholars note that such research can also be used to provide training and workshops for faculty, staff and students. Brilliant (2000), for example, argues that institutions should provide in-service training for their faculty and counseling staff so that they can better understand students' needs and develop action plans to address those needs. Along a similar line of thought, Do (1996) states that counseling centers should use research to help develop academic and life skills workshops that are geared toward the needs of non-traditional students.

Additionally, some researchers think that community college counselors need to better understand the perspective of students. Brilliant (2000), for example, argues that counselors need to spend time with their students, listen to their stories, and pay particular attention to their life histories. In doing this, the author believes the counselors will have better insight into the needs of their students and be able to develop action plans to address those needs. Similarly, Do (1996) urges community colleges to recruit and hire bilingual and bicultural counselors as they will be better prepared to serve as role models and resources.

Addressing these Needs with Limited Resources

Meeting the counseling needs of non-traditional students has been viewed by some as asking the community colleges to provide more services in an environment where the resources are becoming scarce (Durodoye et al, 2000). Recognizing this challenge, Helfgot (1995) suggests that community colleges invest in technology to improve the quality and accessibility of counseling. In practical terms, the author suggests that community colleges create web-based programs that allow students to enroll for courses, obtain degree audits or transcripts, conduct job searches, and address basic questions related to academic policy and advising. While Helfgot does not assume nor want computer-based technology to replace the counselor, he does believe that such systems will reduce counselor workload, which will ultimately allow counselors to focus their energies toward more significant issues facing today's community college students.

From a review of the literature, it becomes clear that there are several significant challenges facing community college counselors. As noted, counselors are seeing a new type of student who does not fit the traditional profile of a college student. Accordingly, counseling centers need to reconceptualize the strategies, models, and manner in which they provide services so that their efforts are more in union with the needs of the population being served.

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